

## Language revitalization, video, and mobile social media: A case study from the Khroskyabs language amongst Tibetans in China

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Technology is by no means the most important channel to maintain a language, but it is an effective mode to communicate and interact using the language. As the lives of Khroskyabs speakers continue to be modernized, fewer and fewer aspects of those lives will take place in Khroskyabs. Furthermore, Khroskyabs speakers tend to express negative attitudes towards their language, especially in comparison to the dominant national language – Mandarin – and the local prestige language – Tibetan. The Mothertongue Film on Mobile Social Media project aims to expand the Khroskyabs language into a new domain amongst its speakers by creating a series of videos in the language and sharing them on social media-WeChat. The emerging use of social media such as WeChat provides a platform for language use in the contemporary context for unrecognized and under-resourced languages like Khroskyabs. This project aimed to address these issues, of domain exclusion and negative attitudes, through the production of mobile digital media that can be freely and conveniently shared via the social media platform WeChat for consumption of people in the Khroskyabs-speaking community.

**1. Introduction** The revitalization of an endangered language typically involves efforts to expand it into new domains, or increase its presence in existing domains (Fishman 1991). Digital media has emerged as a critical domain into which endangered languages can expand with relative ease, compared to, for example, education or government (Carew et al. 2015; Buszard-Welcher 2018). And although digital exclusion of endangered languages remains a serious problem (Leung 2014), the growth of social media platforms in the last fifteen years, in particular, has provided an expanding range of opportunities for communities to create a digital presence for their languages (Honeycutt & Cunliffe 2010; Cocq 2015; Cru 2015; Galla 2016). For unwritten languages, video and audio are the two main ways in which these languages

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can create a digital presence. However, despite the wide-ranging use of social media and audio-visual media in language revitalization, there has been very little discussion of how such media is created and disseminated through social media, and what role it plays in supporting endangered languages.<sup>1</sup> This paper aims to fill this gap in the literatures, through a discussion of the *Mothertongue Film on Mobile Social Media* project, amongst speakers of the Khroskyabs language in China.

The *Mothertongue Film on Mobile Social Media* project aimed to expand the Khroskyabs language, spoken by Tibetans in Rngaba Prefecture,<sup>2</sup> Sichuan Province, into a new domain amongst its speakers. Khroskyabs is an unwritten language, and local traditional knowledge is passed down by storytelling and other oral traditions. As the lives of Khroskyabs speakers continue to be modernized, fewer and fewer aspects of those lives will take place in Khroskyabs unless the domains in which Khroskyabs can be used are expanded. Furthermore, Khroskyabs speakers tend to express negative attitudes towards their language, especially in comparison to the dominant national language – Mandarin – and the local prestige language – Tibetan. This project aimed to address these issues, of domain exclusion and negative attitudes, through the production of mobile digital media that can be freely and conveniently shared via the social media platform WeChat for consumption of people in the Khroskyabs-speaking community.<sup>3</sup>

The first part of this paper reports on an overview of the language background, the research context, and reference to literature about the use and dissemination of digital media for language revitalization (§1, §2, and §3). In the second part, the author, a native-speaker of Khroskyabs and a linguist, gives a personal account of the project and reports on the project design, process, and impact followed by an evaluation of the project (§4 and §5). Changes to the evaluation methods initially planned for the project are discussed in §6, outlining a number of challenges in conducting the project. Finally, §7 provides comments about the replicability and scalability of the project. In the conclusion the author highlights the importance of creating community-driven situations for language revival.

## 2. Background

**2.1 The name “Khroskyabs”** There are approximately 10,000 Khroskyabs speakers in northern Sichuan Province (Huang 2003). Like many other minority languages spoken by Tibetans in China, the Khroskyabs language was not recognized as an independent language until a decade ago (Roche & Suzuki 2018; Roche & Yudru Tsomu 2018). Khroskyabs is a geographic term for a part of today’s Rngaba Prefecture, in northwestern Sichuan Province (Figure 1) in the People’s Republic of

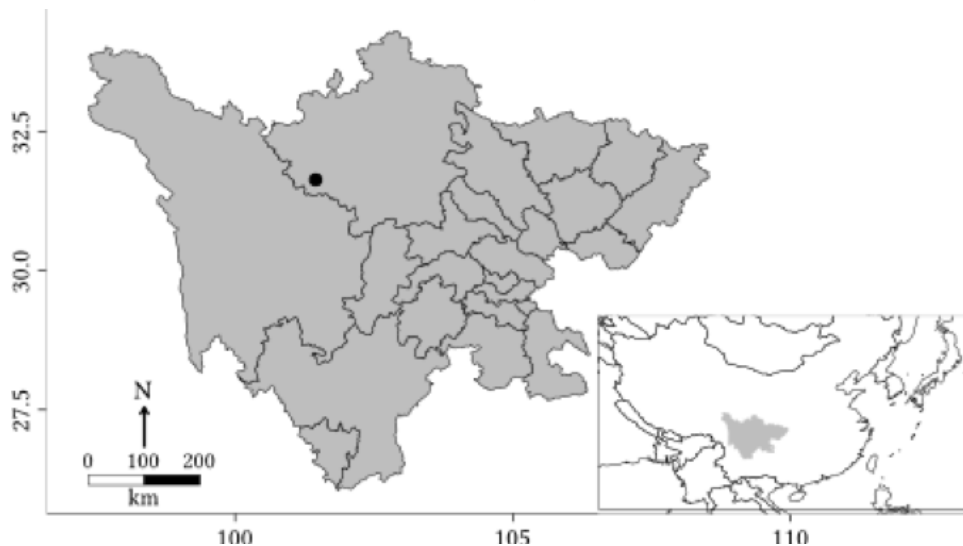
<sup>1</sup>The use of communication technologies predates the rise of the Internet and digital social media. See Taff (1997) for a discussion of how landline telephones were used to support the use and learning of Deg Xinag, the language of the Deg Hit’an people.

<sup>2</sup>Rngaba/Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture.

<sup>3</sup>These materials were also made available to people outside the community who have an interest in Khroskyabs language and culture.

China, and is well known and accepted among the speakers (Lhawa 2012; Lai 2017). Khroskyabs (ཁོ་སྐད་ལྟེན་པ་) is the transliteration from Tibetan to the Roman alphabet according to the Wylie system. The pronunciation of the word “Khroskyabs” is approximately *tchoskiav*, and the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) representation is /tʂʰoscâv/.

**Figure 1.** Khroskyabs speaking area, Rangtang County, in Rngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. (by Thomas Pellard 2016)



Today, linguists refer to the language spoken in this region as Khroskyabs, named after the old tribe of the region. This name is user-friendly and comprehensive for both linguists and the speakers: yet, all other salient names of the language should be taken into account when cataloging it (Chen & Campbell 2018). The speakers themselves refer to the language as *rongskad* which means ‘farmer’s talk’, or ‘valley talk’ as opposed to the nomadic language, Amdo Tibetan, spoken in the mountains.

**2.2 Language overview** Khroskyabs is a rGyalrongic language that belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family. Based on shared phonological and morphological innovations, Lai (2017) claims there are two main branches: Core Khroskyabs dialects and Njorogs (业隆话). Core Khroskyabs consists of Phosul (Puxi 蒲西), Siyewu (斯跃武), Wobzi (Ere 俄热), ’Brongrdzong (Muerzong 木尔宗), Guanyinqiao (观音桥), and Njorogs is ’Jorogs (Yelong 业隆).<sup>4</sup> In *Ethnologue*, Khroskyabs is referred as *Guanyinqiao* after a town in western Sichuan where one dialect of the language is spoken. There are only three linguistic descriptions of this language, and none of them are based on the Siyewu dialect that I work with, spoken in Siyewu Village. Lai Yunfan (2017) wrote a doctoral dissertation about the Wobzi dialect of Khroskyabs in French. Huang Bufan (2003) wrote a grammar of the Guanyinqiao

<sup>4</sup>The names of the dialects are based on the names of the place, whether that is a village or a town.

dialect of Khroskyabs.<sup>5</sup> Yin Weibin 尹蔚彬 (2007) wrote a grammar of another dialect of Khroskyabs called Yelong.

Khroskyabs is known for its complex phonology and morphology, which arguably makes the language harder to learn. For example, it has a complex consonant system with long consonant clusters such as [ɣjnlzdɔ̃] ‘to make someone buy something for the benefit of oneself’. Khroskyabs exhibits templatic morphology,<sup>6</sup> mainly prefixing, with 11 prefix slots and 2 suffix slots (Lai 2017). Moreover, Lai (2017) illustrates how some prefixes undergo complex morphophonological processes: assimilation, dissimilation, metathesis, etc. (e.g., causative prefix *s-*). Language attrition of these complex features is currently seen amongst younger speakers of Khroskyabs.

**2.3 Language situation** Traditionally, Khroskyabs speakers have been agro-pastoralists, and Khroskyabs is only spoken within villages, with no media or school usage. As the lives of Khroskyabs speakers continue to be modernized, fewer and fewer aspects of those lives will take place in Khroskyabs unless the domains in which Khroskyabs can be used are expanded (Na 2018). Since the completion of the 317 National Road<sup>7</sup> in 2006, the rapid exposure of modern objects such as TV/DVDs and increasing Chinese immigrants speeded up the modernization process in remote regions like Khroskyabs speaking communities. Khroskyabs youth face considerable pressure to shift to Mandarin in order to succeed academically and obtain paid employment. Mandarin is also the mandatory language of instruction in schools, and is dominant in all forms of media. The dominance of Mandarin in media, and the exclusion of Khroskyabs, places it on the wrong side of the “digital divide” (Carew et al. 2015) and negatively impacts its vitality. Due to lack of any official support for the use and development of Khroskyabs, and because the national standard language is promoted by the government, the main audio-visual media available to speakers of Khroskyabs are all in Mandarin.

In addition to pressure from Mandarin, Khroskyabs also faces pressure from other Tibetan varieties. Being a linguistic minority within the Tibetan ethnic group gives Khroskyabs speakers a lot of social and economic pressure both due to lack of official recognition as well as mis-recognition<sup>8</sup> by the “mainstream” Tibetan population (Lhundrop, Suzuki, & Roche *forthcoming*). Khroskyabs speakers identify themselves as Tibetan, but Tibetans from other places who speak Amdo Tibetan call them “Rgyalrong Tibetans” or “Rgya ma bod” (neither Chinese nor Tibetan) because of their linguistic distinctiveness (Na 2018). Due to Khroskyabs speakers’ Tibetan identity,

<sup>5</sup>Khroskyabs is recorded as “Lavrung” in Huang’s grammar: this term was not familiar to most Khroskyabs speakers since it is likely based on the clan name of the family who she interviewed.

<sup>6</sup>A form of word structure represented by a template in which roots are accompanied by a sequence of slots.

<sup>7</sup>A major road connects a main Chinese city, Chengdu, with regions west of it, ending in Naque, Tibet.

<sup>8</sup>Recognition by others is a key component of forming self-identity. In the forthcoming article “Language contact and the politics of recognition amongst Tibetans in China: The rTa’u speaking ‘Horpa’ of Khams”, Lhundrop, Suzuki, & Roche define “non-recognition” as when such identities are denied, or “mis-recognition” when they are denied equal respect to mainstream identities. These two often lead to various harms such as social exclusion and interpersonal discrimination against non- and mis-recognized individuals.

Amdo Tibetan is a prestige language among them. In recent years, there has been a wave of interest in learning Tibetan among the Khroskyabs speaking communities: the vast majority of Khroskyabs speakers in Siyuewu Village are now literate in Tibetan.

As a result of the dominance of both Mandarin and Tibetan, Khroskyabs speakers tend to have negative attitudes towards their language. A sociolinguistic survey on language attitudes among Khroskyabs speakers revealed that speakers preferred Khroskyabs to be replaced by Amdo Tibetan even though they agreed that Khroskyabs is a separate language (Lhawa & Lai 2017). Further, most participants agreed that both Tibetan and Chinese speakers are more knowledgeable in general than Khroskyabs speakers because they are literate. Speakers of Khroskyabs, therefore, are unenthusiastic about the maintenance of Khroskyabs.

**2.4 WeChat** In 2016, private homes in Siyuewu village were connected to the Internet, with the result that more and more villagers are able to access on-line materials via smart phones. Previously, the community only had a cellphone tower, and villagers had limited access to the Internet.

A particularly popular use of smart phones at present is uploading and sharing images, texts, videos, audio recordings, and website links on WeChat, an application created by Tencent, China's largest internet services company. WeChat has 1 billion active users monthly in China. Originating as a pared-down version of Tencent's popular QQ instant messenger service, WeChat is especially popular in China's rural communities because it allows users to send instant voicemails as well as texts, a particularly useful feature in areas where electricity and cellular signals are unreliable and where cell phone companies charge extra for providing traditional voicemail services. By storing audio recordings, WeChat also allows users to carry on telephone conversations despite interruptions in service. It also allows users to get around expensive long-distance calling fees, since there is no need to directly call a telephone number. These features, and a simple, intuitive interface based on icons, rather than written commands, makes WeChat particularly appealing to older users and users who speak non-written languages, and who are either illiterate or simply have difficulty typing in Chinese.

In addition to replacing traditional phone and texting services, WeChat is also a social networking platform. Similar to Facebook, but only available as a smart phone application, WeChat allows users to store and curate their own collection of "moments", which they can then share publicly or with selected friends. Moments can include material created and uploaded by the user, such as photos, audio, video, and text, as well as links to on-line materials. Many users make use of the "chat group" function to create virtual spaces where multiple people can all view and respond to each other's posted moments and comments. Chat groups can be private and invitation-only or public and searchable by any WeChat member. WeChat groups are a popular way for extended families, classes, office departments, networks of friends, and in some cases, entire communities, to share news and stay in touch. For example, within Siyuewu village, there are clan-based chat groups that consist of

5–30 households, as well as chat groups that include members of all households and clans in the entire village. There are groups such as classmate groups and groups of Khroskyabs speakers living in towns and cities that include members from outside of the village.

Villagers in Siyuewu of all ages rely on WeChat to communicate with friends and family, and also to provide locally specific entertainment and news, mostly through audio messaging. WeChat account holders are of all ages and those who do not have their own phones or accounts are given access to WeChat media through their friends and family members. Watching short videos, listening to music and reading texts are often communal activities, with multiple people crowding around one phone. Commercially produced media is also distributed this way, as is personally-created media. Given the nature of its platform as well as its ubiquity, WeChat presents an excellent medium through which to encourage mother tongue usage.

**3. The project** The Mothertongue Film on Mobile Social Media project was funded by the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (SCFCH). As a community member, a native speaker of Khroskyabs and a linguist, I was responsible for planning and carrying out the details of the project with the supervision of the Northwest Indian Languages Institute (NILI) at the University of Oregon. This project aimed to contribute to linguistic sustainability by underscoring the importance of making decisions about technology as a component of contemporary language revitalization. This project involved the development, production, and distribution of five videos to test the feasibility of this approach and gauge the community's response.

Galla (2016) discusses positive functions of digital technology in indigenous language revitalization efforts by surveying a total of 80 participants representing at least 47 Indigenous language individuals, organizations, and institutions that serve one or more Indigenous language communities across the world. At the same time, usage of technology should be based upon communities' careful evaluations of all the issues involved such as practical issues (e.g., power sources, internet coverage, availability of technology, issues of access and usability) and social/cultural issues (e.g., ethical issues, dissemination, choice of language variety and appropriateness of the topics chosen). This paper will show how some these factors and decisions are community-specific and need to be relevant to the language environment.

**3.1 Linguistic sustainability** The transdisciplinary analogy of "sustainability" to human language diversity criticizes the tendency of other models of language maintenance to overlook the natural environment where the language is spoken (Bastardas-Boada 2007). It also challenges expansionist and dominating ideologies such as linguistic superiority. My mothertongue film project, therefore, tries to dignify the self-image of subordinated and non-majority languages by making a language sustainable in a local sociocultural ecosystem. These linguistic groups can then control their own communicative space and autonomously regulate public uses of their own language. The circulation of such electronic artifacts can reinforce a conceptual separation of linguistic varieties in order for group identification of lesser-known languages (Eisenlohr

2004). In this project, as discussed below, the goal of language revitalization was approached from two different angles: speakers' relationship toward Khroskyabs and their linguistic behavior.

**3.1.1 Speakers' relationship toward Khroskyabs** Currently, Khroskyabs speakers use Khroskyabs to call one another on WeChat, but they do not use it to create viewable media content. Instead, they consume entertainment and news media in Chinese or, to a lesser extent, Amdo Tibetan. Part of the reason for this is speakers' attitudes toward their own language. Other Tibetans from outside of Khroskyabs communities discriminate against and make fun of Khroskyabs speakers, despite the fact that Khroskyabs people identify themselves as Tibetans. A lot of Khroskyabs speakers thus have a negative attitude towards speaking Khroskyabs in public. Furthermore, due to social and economic pressures, most Khroskyabs speakers are either bilingual or trilingual in Tibetan and Mandarin.

Khroskyabs is not associated with modern technology or domains outside of traditional vocations and homes. Most speakers have a cell phone and a WeChat account, and they consume media content in Tibetan and Mandarin because that is what is available. Adaptation theory suggests that rapid cultural change is responsible for language shift, which is aided by the fact the speakers view their language as having little value (McConvell 2010). By exposing speakers to examples of entertaining and educational media in Khroskyabs made by Khroskyabs speakers, I hope that speakers will start to view their mother tongue as a tool that can be used to effectively and authentically communicate in any domain of life. Many young speakers of Khroskyabs have been inspired by my videos and have now started to make short videos in Khroskyabs (see discussions of outcomes below).

**3.1.2 Linguistic behavior** Language shift is a product of human behavior (Perley 2011). The shifts are often due to dominant culture vs minority culture, colonization, access to schooling, and language attitudes. The usual scenario is that speakers cease to speak one language in the course of speaking another (i.e., language shift: see Pauwels 2016). Members of the generation that actively participates in language shift still know their mother tongue and are often able to use the language when it is called for throughout their lives but they do not. Consequently, the language is not transmitted to the next generation. When viewed from the perspective of behavior, rather than knowledge, language endangerment can therefore be said to happen much earlier than is typically considered to be the case. According to this view, language death also is theoretically reversible in some sense, since it is possible for individuals who have stopped speaking a language to re-engage in the behavior and for new people to learn how to perform the behavior as well (Hinton, Huss, & Roche 2018).

One important linguistic behavior is the activity of listening (or, for written languages, reading). The *Mothertongue Film on Mobile Social Media* project specifically targets the behavior of passive listening, i.e., listening not performed in the context of a dialog. Like the rest of the world, Khroskyabs speakers have begun to do more and more of their passive listening with the use of electronic devices. Because there is no

Khroskyabs media to speak of, passive listening has come to be dominated by Tibetan and Mandarin in recent years. It can be expected that a language shift in one area of linguistic behavior will gradually trigger a shift in other areas, including speaking, eventually leading to loss of linguistic knowledge. By creating media that can be passively listened to, the project worked against the increase of non-Khroskyabs language passive listening behavior in Khroskyabs speakers and potentially builds semantic domains in which the language is used. Additionally, a benefit of the digital video format is that speakers living outside of Siyuewu (for example, boarding school students and migrant laborers) also have access to stories and other content in their mother tongue.

**4. Project design** This project involved the development, production and distribution of five videos to test the feasibility of this approach and gauge the community's response. I produced 5 short films, ranging in length from 2–5 minutes during my summer break in Oregon, USA, with funding from the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (SCFCH). The films were then uploaded onto my personal WeChat account for Khroskyabs-speaking communities, as well as people outside the community, to view and share them with their own WeChat groups.

**4.1 Video topic selections** As a community member, a native speaker of Khroskyabs, and a linguist, I proposed topics that were manageable for me to create and which I also anticipated would be interesting for my audience, thus contributing to the stated goals motivating passive listening and also positively changing language attitudes by motivating community members to see that Khroskyabs can be part of a wide-ranging, adventurous, and academically successful life. I also consulted my family and friends back home in relation to the topics I selected. The final topics of the five videos were:

1. creating the first Khroskyabs song
2. promoting Khroskyabs language to my international friends
3. introducing US food
4. introducing Yulha's life as the first Khroskyabs student going to school in the US
5. animating a popular Khroskyabs folktale

Following, a brief summary of each of the films is given.

*Video 1: Song for Giving Toasts*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFzXC9M8R9U>

There are no songs sung traditionally in Khroskyabs, probably due to historically diverse language contact reasons. Roche (2017) claims northeast Tibet was linguistically “super diverse”, and that various social groups had different plurilingual repertoires and distinct translanguaging praxis that often included singing in Tibetan. This



contributed to the fact that Khroskyabs was not used for singing (Roche 2017): all songs are sung in Amdo Tibetan, and some in Mandarin, in the Khroskyabs-speaking region. The first topic that came to my mind, therefore, was creating a song in Khroskyabs.

Many of my Khroskyabs-speaking friends were shocked to hear this idea because they simply did not think it was possible to sing in Khroskyabs. One friend even commented, “It [Khroskyabs] is too complex<sup>9</sup> to be used for singing songs!” That said, people agreed it was valuable to have a song in Khroskyabs despite their skepticism about the possibility.

The original song is in Tibetan. I translated the lyrics into Khroskyabs and performed the song in Khroskyabs. This is a song about how to appropriately give toasts, by thanking the deities, parents, and guests. After seeing this video, one of my cousins said, “I loved the song. Now, I am proud that I have a Khroskyabs song to sing at social gatherings.”

*Video 2: Khroskyabs Dialogue*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ip8G3Se\\_U4s&t=35s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ip8G3Se_U4s&t=35s)

Speakers of Khroskyabs think that their language is too difficult for others to learn, because of its difficult phonology, particularly its long consonant clusters. Speakers as well as outsiders equate this to a language that is almost impossible to learn and speak. Therefore, I decided to teach Khroskyabs to my friends at the University of Oregon and have them initiate simple conversations in Khroskyabs to show that Khroskyabs is learnable by non-Khroskyabs people.

My friends in the video were from many different countries, including Uganda, Chile, Myanmar, the USA, and China. Most Khroskyabs speakers have never seen people from outside of the region they are from, so it was very surprising for them to see outsiders learning and speaking Khroskyabs. By having outsiders using Khroskyabs, it shows that Khroskyabs is both important and learnable, and therefore helps bring prestige to the language.

*Video 3: Introducing US Food*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8-ouSyaLiA&t=2s>

Every summer, when I traveled back to my hometown during school breaks, one of the most common questions asked by the villagers was, “What do Americans eat?” Initially, it was difficult to pin-point what real American food is. Pizza? Hamburgers? Most of these are difficult to make in a rural village in Tibet, so I decided to use ingredients that the villagers have access to, such as potato, beef, barley, and so on, to show my community what “American food” is.

In this film, my friend, Angela, showed viewers how to make simple homemade American food: mashed potato, beef and barley soup, and pork steak. A few other things are also shown in order to satisfy Khroskyabs speakers’ curiosity. It walks

<sup>9</sup>The actual translation of what she said is something like “too tongue-twistery to sing”.

the viewers through an American grocery store, and showcases an American kitchen, including utensils. The most surprising thing for both me and my community was the American way of making mashed potato by adding milk. A villager told me that they tried adding milk in their mashed potato, but did not like it.

*Video 4: Yulha's Life in the US*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urPoI9lCEIE>

Another question that community members constantly ask me when I visit home during breaks is, “What is life like in the US?” Most Khroskyabs speakers have never traveled further than the provincial capital, Chengdu. In this video, I described my daily life in the US. My narration of my life in the US introduces the beautiful Oregon landscape and architecture, and aspects of college life for international students, including sharing my cultural food with my friends there. People from my community were excited to see that someone who grew up in the village had traveled this far. Many younger people started asking me about the processes and decisions that had enabled me to do this.

*Video 5: The Crow and the Fox*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmP-nttMXAc&t=44s>

The initial idea for the last video was to translate a funny video available on the internet and narrate it in Khroskyabs. Because copyright restrictions made this difficult, I decided to create my own drawings for a stop motion film. Oral culture such as storytelling used to be one of the most popular forms of entertainment for children in my community. The film was based on a story I grew up listening to and telling, like many other Khroskyabs kids. I used stop motion techniques to illustrate this story in a way that is new to Khroskyabs communities. Nowadays, many Khroskyabs children are born outside of the villages, where Khroskyabs is not the primary language; therefore it is especially important to create language-learning opportunities for these children.

Overall, the intention was to create fun and engaging videos in Khroskyabs to show the use of the language in modern and new domains, and document the natural use of the language in these new contexts. These videos are an important medium to increase awareness of the importance of mother tongues among the speakers. In addition, they should inspire other young Tibetans to use their phones and other media to make small videos in their own languages.

**4.2 Filming and editing** I filmed and edited all the videos, under the supervision of Robert Elliot at the Northwest Indian Languages Institute (NILI) at the University of Oregon. I used photos I already had for the video, “Yulha’s Life in the US”. The video footage in the other four videos was filmed for the project. The project funders, the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (SCFCH), lent me the equipment for filming as part of the contract, which included a Panasonic HC-

WX970 video camcorder, a tripod, a recorder, an external hard drive, headphones, and a memory card. The films “Dialogue” and “Introducing US Food” were easier to film and edit than “Song for Giving Toasts” and “The Crow and the Fox”.

For the song, I asked one of my Tibetan friends in Oregon to play the mandolin first and I later sang the song, and then edited the two tracks together. The hardest part was matching the video with the audio track. Making the stop motion film was also challenging, since I had never done it before: getting the color correct and preventing the drawing from shifting in the frame were particularly difficult.

On average, each film took around 25 hours to film and edit, and the whole project took a total of 260 hours, including training and logistical arrangements. I used iMovie on my laptop to edit the films, which was adequate despite some shortcomings, such as the font size of the subtitles being fixed. I had used iMovie prior to the project, and this software is very intuitive to use. I therefore only had to learn how to edit stop motion films, by watching YouTube videos. Despite the challenges I faced, such as dealing with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and technical difficulties in filming and editing, it was an enjoyable and fulfilling process.

**4.3 Distributions and reaction** During the initial distribution, I shared the videos with five chat groups that had memberships ranging from 32–192 people, and which included three village groups, one clan-based group, and a classmate group. The total membership of the five groups was approximately 200 people. Most of the members of those chat groups are Khroskyabs speakers who I knew in person. Within the first three hours after the videos were shared, many people shared them to their own WeChat friends and groups. More than 10 people sent me friend requests to ask for more of the videos within that time as well.

Most Khroskyabs speakers over 60 years old do not have WeChat accounts. When the project began, I had hoped that younger family members who have WeChat would share the videos with the elders. However, most of the younger generation spend most of their time outside the villages, in towns and cities, earning cash income for the family. To reach Khroskyabs speakers who did not have access to WeChat, I therefore made 120 DVDs containing the videos and sent them back to Siyewu to distribute to each household. The videos were also uploaded to YouTube and shared with my friends in the US, including those who were directly involved in the project.

Two weeks after the videos were shared on WeChat, I conducted informal WeChat interviews to collect information about people’s reactions to the videos. I selected 20 people randomly in my contact list and asked them these questions:

1. Did you watch the videos? If you did, did you like them or not?
2. Which ones were your favorite and least favorite?
3. What topics would you like to see more about in the future?

Most people answered that they really enjoyed seeing foreigners speaking Khroskyabs: one of my uncles even said that he was unable to stop his tears flowing when he saw outsiders speaking Khroskyabs. 11 people’s favorite video was the song about giving

a toast. They said they would try to sing it on occasions such as at social gatherings because it is about how to appropriately give toasts by thanking the deities, parents, and guests. All respondents were too polite to pick a least favorite film.

**5. Project impact** There are 523 residents in Siyuewu village, who were the immediate target of this project. A rough estimate of 2,500 people viewed the videos, including both Khroskyabs and non-Khroskyabs speakers. Villagers are highly connected to one another by WeChat. Beyond the primary targeted audience, there are about 10,000 speakers of Khroskyabs, distributed in three townships (refer to the list of figures below with reference to Huang 2003). People from nearby communities in Jinchuan County and Puxi Township should have been able to understand the Siyuewu dialect. Maerkang Khroskyabs speakers would have a hard time understanding the videos, but it is possible that the videos still had a symbolic significance for them, potentially inspiring similar projects for the Maerkang dialect.

#### Jinchuan County

- Guanyingqiao Township: 2,200
- Eri Township: 2,500
- Ergali: 2000
- Taiyanghe Village: 300
- Yelong Village: 530

#### Maerkang

- Muerzong Township: 1,280
- Baiwan Township, Nianke Village: 188
- Dashidang Village: 286

#### Rangtang County, Puxi Township

- Siyuewu Village: 523
- Puxi Village: 8 households
- Xiaoyili Village: 120

The videos received much positive feedback both from Khroskyabs speakers and non-Khroskyabs speakers. This project had a positive impact on the issues of negative attitudes amongst Khroskyabs speakers, by showing that the language can be part of a wide-ranging, adventurous, and academically successful life. Many of my friends and relatives shared the videos with friends that they know. Some of my Tibetan

friends reached out to me and said that that they had not previously realized how different Khroskyabs sounded from Tibetan. Villagers continue asking me to resend the videos to them, and also asking for more videos like these.

In addition to these impacts on the Khroskyabs-speaking community, this project also helped raise awareness about the language and its predicament. The film “Khroskyabs Dialogue” was entered into the *My Language. My Culture* international film competition, organized as part of the Engaged Humanities project, hosted by the University of Warsaw,<sup>10</sup> and was awarded first prize in the category “60 second films”.

**6. Challenges** This project involved the development, production, and distribution of five videos to test the feasibility of this approach and gauge the community’s response. The original project proposal thus included plans for an impact study. An online survey followed by face-to-face interviews were planned, in order to count the number of people who have watched the videos and to gauge their response after the production and distribution of the first five videos. The survey could then be used to inform a larger project, perhaps involving the production of longer, more highly produced forms of media and possibly expanding to other participants.

There were many complications involving three parties: the SCFCH, NILI, and me, as an international student in the US. There were also IRB issues, so the impact study had to be removed from the proposal in order to move on with the project after two months of negotiations. By the end, the project schedule had to be extended by a few months, due to the delay for the project start time as well as my personal health issues. Despite all the back-and-forth communications about the project approval process between the University of Oregon, the SCFCH, and me, I enjoyed having the support of NILI as a professional agency.

Besides the administrative challenges mentioned previously, I encountered other minor difficulties in the process of making the videos. The first difficult decision was deciding which languages, among Tibetan, Mandarin, English, and the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), the subtitles of the videos should be in. The primary audience for the five videos was Khroskyabs speakers and they already speak the language, so no subtitles were necessary. The audience that the project wanted to target was people who understand IPA and are interested in doing linguistic analysis. Furthermore, Khroskyabs does not have its own writing system, so IPA transcriptions were given for all the videos. English translation had to be included due to a funding requirement. Adding either Tibetan or Mandarin would have enabled the videos to reach a wider audience. However, two important factors outweighed the potential benefits. Firstly, adding two more languages would have overcrowded the screen and the space for subtitles. Secondly, adding either Tibetan or Mandarin would have been distracting for Khroskyabs, especially when the ultimate goal for the project was to make Khroskyabs speakers feel good about their own language. Only the “Song for Giving Toasts” film included Tibetan, because the original song was in Tibetan.

<sup>10</sup><https://engagedhumanities.al.uw.edu.pl/a-list-of-winners-and-finalists-a-photography-and-film-contest/>.

**7. Replicability and scalability** Nowadays most phones have good cameras, and people like taking photos and video on their phones. Minimal equipment and skills are required for people to create short clips in their mother tongue for local consumption, even though having some filming and editing experience with better equipment produces higher quality films.

My passion for preserving my mother tongue was the primary drive for this project. I started with no formal training in filming and editing or experience with similar projects. For younger generations who spend plenty of time on their phones, the only identified constraint for making similar short videos is time and commitment. That said, further studies should be conducted to understand how the use of mobile technologies is shaped by the context, values, and practices of the user community (Carew et al. 2015).

Another important factor for me to initiate the project was funding. Getting small grants allowed me to put my dreams into action. I actively sought out funding opportunities to support my project, even as a full-time student at the time with many other commitments. Without the financial support, it would have taken a lot more time and commitment to do this project. On the other hand, smaller-scale videos, such as documenting a family pilgrimage to Lhasa with just Khroskyabs narration, would be manageable for someone with no background in filming and editing. It would be limited to Khroskyabs-speaker consumption only since other captions in fonts such as Tibetan, Chinese, or IPA would not be available. Holding a workshop to learn some basic filming and editing skills among speakers would raise confidence for them to make similar videos. It is extremely important to ensure training for ongoing community-led work and sustainability with tools that are readily available to the language community.

**8. Conclusion** The overarching goal of the project was to raise awareness in the minds of the speech community that they have a unique language and that it has value outside of their community. I hope that when speakers of Khroskyabs watch these videos, they feel empowered, and proud that their language is being put on display on the internet. I also hope that they will enjoy seeing non-Khroskyabs people speaking their language. As a small ancillary benefit, the record of language attitudes that I infer from the interviews could serve as a foundation for future studies about changing language attitudes in the face of the impending loss of the Khroskyabs language.


Indigenous communities are naturally skeptical of how technology can aid in language and culture revitalization. Technology in language and cultural revitalization, therefore, has been somewhat under-utilized. Technology is by no means the most important channel to maintain a language, but it is an effective mode to communicate and interact using the language. The emerging use of social media such as WeChat provides a platform for language use in the contemporary context for unrecognized and under-resourced languages like Khroskyabs. The broader implication of my mother tongue film project has been to recognize and encourage possible situations for language use that are community-driven and do not rely on outside experts to intervene in the fate of rapidly shifting languages.

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